

diaspora and the difficult art of dying

The way of writing is straight and crooked

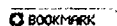
—Heraclitus

sh-mishra/

in the end is my memory of the beginning, a mixed brew of history and hyperbole, the sun's chakra breaking up the earth of basti into six million jigsaw pieces, and the bo-tree catching fire at midnight by itself, and the koels pecking out the eyes of brinda the milch cow, and pitaji standing among the ruined fields of channa, weeping, and maji bent over the inflated moons of roti, weeping because he wept, and the immemorial debt to a greasy man of crisp dhoti and castemark whom we called maibaap, and my sister nudging the age of dowry, and i the eldest of three sons, sixteen years old and already corroded by despair, stealing away from home and village and province, never once looking at the moon grazing on the thatch of my nostalgia, walking by night and sleeping by day, until rivers no longer gave up their names nor roads their destinations, how many times i yearned to return to my village, ask me how many times my legs faltered during that terrible flight, but then i remembered the scorpions crackling in the wells of basti and the mynahs dying in the skies of basti, and that nightmare drove me towards i knew not where, maybe i sought work in a modest village, maybe i desired to fall off the edge of the world, maybe i was questing for ayodhya, shangri-la, el dorado, maybe, maybe. there are maybes ad nauseum, but my destiny was an arkathi with a tongue sweeter than shakkar, who sold me a story as steep as the himalayas, and his images had the tang of lassi and his metaphors had the glint of rupees, so that two days later i was on pericles, hauling anchor in the calcutta of my diaspora, and india slipped through my fingers like silk, like silk it slipped through the fingers of three thousand seven hundred and forty eight girmityas, and many things were lost during that nautical passage, family, caste and religion, and yet many things were also found, chamars found brahmmins, muslims found hindus, biharis found marathis, so that by the end of the voyage we were a nation of jahajibhais, rowat gawat heelat dholat adat padat, all for one and one for all, yet this newfound myth fell apart the moment we docked in nukulau, because the sahibs hacked our bonds with the sabre of their commands and took us away in drabs and drabs, rahim to navua, shakuntala to labasa, mahabir to nandi, and my lot was a stony acreage of hell in naitasiri, where i served the indenture of my perdition, seasick, as if the earth here was no more than an extension of the sea, you must understand that nothing else bothered me quite as much, not the coolumber and his whoring with our women, not the fifteen hours of drudgery in fields that offended horizons, not the miserly rations of stale chawal, not even the sadistic lashes of sirdar ahmed kaffar ali, no, none of that bothered me quite as much as my illness, which came and went in purple swirls of nausea, and then one day i saw chinappa retching his innards over a bed of marigolds, his feet clearing terra firma by twelve feet and at once i knew we shared a secret fever, a month later twenty girmityas of ucivai had soared beyond the cane-fields to the utter dismay of the overseer, who ordered them back to the plantation with the aid of an inflamed crucifix, then docked their wages for trying to levitate all the way back to india, in fact my fever had turned into an epidemic of sorts, travelling from fiji to mauritius, from mauritius to trinidad, from trinidad to surinam, but though a platoon of experts was consulted in three continents and two hemispheres, though a flock of dispatches flew with the grace of carrier pigeons from csr to governor gordon to colonial office to india office to viceroy and back again, and though every quack in the empire came up with the placebo of a remedy, no antidote was ever found for mal de mer, and i was still defying gravity, then one night adaam aziz hanged himself from a rafter in bhut len, the soles of his feet were a tangle of cankered roots, a week later badhu prasad stowed away on british peer to the kasi of his memories, haunted by the putrefied soles of adaam aziz, but i was no devotee of yamraj and my dreams of india were marred by a brood of scorpions, and between the hell of girmity and the hell of basti was an ocean of alchemy, yes i stayed back because i had endured a sea-change and was no longer the i of my origin, what more is there to say, i served the girmity of my misfortune and leased a bhiga of land from the company and married sundaree, who in less than one year retched up all her memories of krishnas and tulsis and neems and diyas, thus letting the past stray from her mouth to form the present, so that in the end she no longer felt the surf rolling beneath her feet, while in contrast my sickness grew worse by the minute, which was odd since this was the great age of our communal imagining, tazia in fields and holi in streets, puja in mandirs and namaj in masjids, samajis in labasa and sanatanis in ba, maybe in my heart of hearts i knew we were imagining ourselves against the sahibs in order to supplant them, and around the taukeis in order to ignore them, maybe that was why my condition grew steadily worse, then one morning of pitchfork rains and slapdash winds i met ratu ilisoni viriviri, the tui-ni-vanua who roamed the margins of my land, my house, my vision, but who said i roamed the margins of his land, his house, his vision, thus began the shitty history of our misunderstanding, he was blind to my illness and i was blind to his terror of my illness, yet for the first time that night i dreamt of degei who scribbled fiji on a parchment of waves, and the gata of creation said that to be rid of my affliction i had to die into the vanua, the land, but like all muses the vanua accepts only those who invoke it by name, hence dying is an art like living, procured in the ripeness of time, safe to say i took his advice to heart and shaped from it my life's philosophy, even as the plough struck the clods of freedom in the colony of our despair, and learning the art of dying i began to live through all my senses, they were the great years of my life because i began to discover what was already discovered, to name things as they were already named, i'd see but not hear a turtle dove until i said kurukuru, then its liquid-glass throat would bubble in the reeds of my soul, i'd smell but not taste an oyster until i said dio, then it would deposit the pearl of a flavour on my tongue, i'd hear but not feel the breeze until i said caucau, then it would stroke with a royal plume the castle of my skin, i'd savour but not smell a fish until i said ika, then it would fill my lungs with the breath of oceania, i'd feel but not see the storm until i said cava, then it would strike with lightning the domes of my eyes, so it was that little by little i went through another sea-change as my discovery of an oceanic present leaked into my memory of an indian past, until a time came when i could no longer think of machli, for instance, without thinking of ika, it was as if machli as word and idea and culture had never existed prior to ika, prior to my life on this archipelago, and yet one was forever inside and around the other, in short my act of invocation had made me visible and the island real, yes in the end i recognised the country of my banishment, i knew for instance that the third tide after the full moon brought in the king walu, that a hurricane was imminent when the doi flowered in march, that the flesh of niu karawa was more succulent in the dry season, with the result that i suffered less and less from my ailment and seldom left terra firma and then only by a few inches, and it was about this time that i sprang a taste for kava and shared mine with no less a foe than ratu viriviri, together we'd sit on a pandanus mat in the twilight of our decrepitude and he'd point to a flame tree and say sekoula and i'd point to the same tree and say gulmohur, and he'd reflect on what i'd said before conceding yes yes that is a better name, and i'd wonder if the names from my past were altering his present in the way that the names of his present had altered my past, o yes that year i ought to have died into the vanua, but instead we—grower and harvester and mill-worker—struck against the company and the sahibs sent in the native sepoys in frowning khakis to break up the hartaal, and hobbling in their midst was my friend ratu viriviri, yet i begrudge him nothing for they had us both bamboozled, taukei and coolie alike, yes it may be true that he joined the valagi to protect his vanua, it may be equally true that i fought against the latter to secure my freedom, but truth is a fickle sheikh in a seraglio of memories, so let me say that what happened happened, and afterwards i felt the land uncoiling beneath my feet and the surf growling in my eardrums, and realised that everything had changed and yet nothing had changed, and all at once i knew that i'd come to the end of my tether, and yet i'd never been further away from dying, and so it was that two months later, in the mercurial season of cane-fires and the sky a vulture swarm of black confetti, i dissolved into the grey rodent flesh of my only child mahadeo, and sundaree looked for me everywhere and then assumed that a madness had sent me back to the basti of my genesis, but all the while i was there in the hearth of her affection, learning to be unlike my runaway father, so that i grew up with an intense hatred of ratoons, you see, unlike the girmitya of my former avatar, i ascribed my condition to the whole damnable history of sugar and to the stolid gull of a peasantry, in a word, i switched professions and became a carpenter, yet i admit that mine was no potluck decision but one taken with a firm millennial end in mind, i had resolved to build a house that would withstand the oceanic tremors of my island, that would give me respite from my long and giddy life, and i remember on the day of my resolution as i dismantled the shack of my serfdom, kanti the trader arrived all the way from surat, his body trigged out in yards of homespun tornado, his feet shod in scarlet chappals, and he had a limp saffron jholi draped across his shoulder and an ashen moon thumb on his forehead, and he asked me about my desires from under the shade of a raintree and i told him all, as if he were the shaman of my salvation, and

he dug into his gunny sack and pulled out bolts and planks and beams and roofs, and in return i gave him the earnings from my bygone pastoral life, and once a month he came by to watch the wood grow into a bungalow, his jholi glowing with the materials of my slow addiction, and i thought he envied my lot in life while it was i who envied his self-assurance, his breezy gait and blustery talk, his freedom from mal de mer, his genius for six languages and feeling for one, and much more besides, then one day he took off his chappals and showed me his feet which were smothered in a network of ingrown roots, alive and squirming, as if sustained by some dark visceral logic, and i knew then that his sickness was worse than mine, that he was little more than the contents of his jholi and that, in less than one year, he would forsake the radha of his life to marry a stranger in the surat of his myopia, but that is the stuff of a different story. meanwhile i had moved into my new house with sundaree, my wife, my mother, who expired on the night i wed amrita, the daughter of a market vendor, but who refused to burn until her corpse had been duly sprinkled with gangajal, thus dying into india without acknowledging fiji, but unlike sundaree i lived on in the flesh of my undying self, sheltering from the sea in the fortress of my seclusion, then the theatre of war erupted somewhere beyond the horizon and i auditioned for a part, thinking that i may yet die into the vanua, the land, but i was escorted from the stage by a special force of berets in a state of delirium, and later amrita told me about my great relapse, how i had turned the colour of offal and droned out a mad litany of demands in exchange for my service, equal pay for equal worth for equal risk, independence for fiji, india, africa, expulsion of the csr from the known universe, unconditional access to valagi hospitals, clubs, schools and playing fields, crash course on imperialism for the local taukei, secure land tenure for peasant farmers and the like, and when many years later the grandson of ratu viriviri alluded to this moment of my treachery to justify his coup d'etat, i set about blaming my illness instead of probing his logic, in any event, i went back to the lair of my refuge after the shame of military rejection and pottered around the house while amrita sold dog-eared cabbages from a backyard garden to keep us afloat, then one dawn she found the lease of our undoing inside a dowry box and by noon a squadron of termites had invaded the house, and they shed their wings and chatted through the timber, and for some twenty years i heard the rumour of their carpentry, until in the end the house was reduced to a midden of talcum powder, but by then i had melted into subadra. my only daughter, and amrita had eloped to england with the cockney of her infatuation, yes amrita had shared my illness but felt that the remedy lay in physical motion, in not staying put, she was convinced that if the sea was the cause of her malaise then it was also its cure, that in time the caravel becomes the cradle so long as we stay afloat, but i was in love with the island of my torment, and so after the termites ate through my lease and ratu viriviri took back the land of his ancestry, i wandered from village to village for what seemed like an eternity, until one day i arrived in suva where everyone had my illness, even the taukei, but not a soul suffered from it, and it struck me that the denizens of the city had no need of roots because they had smothered the vanua in steel and concrete, thereby making of their illness a wondrous virtue, and they floated through the streets with a lightness of being and they chewed their food with a casual dispassion, and they had no need to stray from the city because the world came to them on trucks and ships and planes, and they procreated and laboured and expired as citizens, as those who were defined by what they had created and not by what they had inherited, and though i saw the moth of capital alight on the few and not the many, and though i understood its great sleights and feints and evasions, i was nonetheless attracted to its erratic flight through the raucous bazaar of my fascination and to its raw magic that transformed the humble lemon seller into a lemonade tycoon, but most of all i was attracted to the way it first made and then forgave the rootless soul, and so i settled down in the city of my third avatar and joined the local bank as a clerk, and that year when the sahibs departed with their union jack, i met and married the civil servant of my stability and together we worshipped the twin gods of thrift and industry, and together we built a house on the freehold of our dreams, and together we sent our son abroad to learn the ways of other cities, i thought i'd at last found respite from my long illness, i thought the city by its nature belonged to all citizens, but they came on the may of our forgetting to claim for themselves the city we had all made, kaimdia and kaiviti and kaivalagi, and once again i witnessed the miracle of mass levitation, though this time not in the remote plantations of gimit but in the desperate streets of suva, as teachers, toy-makers, lawyers, panel-beaters, civil servants, physicians, wholesalers, plumbers, tax agents, engineers, beauticians, batik-printers, among others, among many others, lifted clear off the ground and drifted across the reels to the lands of their new diaspora, america and canada and aotearoa and australia, and i too felt the asphalt yield under my feet and saw jagan, my husband of twenty years, beckoning furiously from the streets below, but nothing could entice me back to earth, not my husband, not my city, not my history, nothing, and, in a few seconds, i'd breached a cupola of clouds and rounded the towers of sydney and dissolved into the body of my son, rajesh, who sat at his desk writing the first of his many stories about the island of his nostalgia in the hope that some day, when no one is watching, he will die into the acreage of his prose.

Citations: this selection of poems appeared in *Diaspora and the Difficult Art of Dying*, Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2002.



© 2007-2013 Mascara Poetry Inc. First Published April 07, ISSN: 1835-4017 All Rights Reserved All work in Mascara is the sole property of the artists and may not be reproduced for any purpose without permission.